

Plurais irregulares: uma forma criativa de ensinar gramática Irregular plurals: an ingenious way of teaching grammar

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Abstract

The main purpose of our paper is to focus on the intrinsic nature of irregular plurals in order to understand the evolution of English throughout the centuries. We intend to show how teaching and learning the irregular plurals can be not only of the utmost importance, but also good fun. By presenting creative activities, we wish to make teachers aware of these issues in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language; irregular plurals; Old English; Middle English; Modern English.*

Resumo

Este artigo centra-se na análise da natureza intrínseca dos plurais irregulares, com vista a possibilitar a compreensão da evolução do inglês ao longo dos séculos. Pretendemos demonstrar de que forma o ensino dos plurais irregulares não só se afigura como de importância indiscutível, mas também pode ser divertido. Através da apresentação de atividades criativas, pretendemos fomentar a consciencialização dos professores de inglês face à relevância destes itens no ensino do inglês como língua estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: *inglês como língua estrangeira; plurais irregulares; inglês antigo; inglês médio; inglês moderno*

Introduction

Teaching can be a rather exhausting task, bearing in mind the difficulties teachers might come across with, especially when dealing with grammar issues. Grammar has often been taught in a rather traditional way, based on grammatical patterns learnt through repetition and substitution, transformation and translation (known as the grammar-translation method). The grammar-based method is what has remained from audio-lingualism, according to the North-American tradition, or structuralism in the United Kingdom, a popular approach from the 1950s, grounded in behaviourist theories of learning, according to which most learning is the result of habit formation (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, pp. 1-3). The major flaw of audiolingualism/structuralism was that students were exposed to neither real nor realistic language.

Nowadays, most teachers mainly follow a communicative approach, according to which *language is not just patterns of grammar with vocabulary items slotted in, but also involves language functions* (Harmer, 2007, p. 50) to be performed using a wide range of language components. In

addition to this, Harmer (*ibidem*) also points out a second principle of communicative language teaching (CLT), which consists of exposing students to language and providing them with opportunities for language use, so that they feel motivated and capable of communicating effectively in real situations. As a result of this exposure, students are expected to communicate real messages in real contexts.

However, from our point of view, there is still some prejudice towards the application of this method to the teaching of grammar. If, on the one hand, teachers can come up with creative and communicative activities when dealing with the four skills (i.e. writing, speaking, reading and listening), on the other, they lack resourcefulness when faced with the teaching of grammar, ending up adopting the old-fashioned structuralist methods. This is clearly concomitant with teachers' lack of confidence and fear of negative reactions, and students will inevitably become unenthusiastic and lose motivation.

Having this in mind, it is our main focus to demonstrate that it is possible to tackle a grammar item from a more dynamic, creative and communicative perspective. Thus, we have selected the issue of irregular plurals to emphasise the importance of understanding the evolution of English throughout the centuries. Teachers need to be aware of the relevance of the history of English in order to be able to thoroughly explain the origins of irregular plurals, even though many of these plurals currently tend to be regular. The knowledge of the history of English will provide teachers with extra confidence and self-reliance towards English language teaching, in general, and the issue of irregular plurals, in particular. Furthermore, it will enhance students' knowledge of English culture and history, fostering the opportunity to establish a link with other school subjects, such as history or literature.

The first part of our paper briefly describes the periods of evolution of the English language and presents their main features. In the second part, we focus in more detail on the irregular plurals, especially those resulting from inflectional endings and from Latin and Greek influences. Then, to show some practical examples of how teachers can present this specific grammar item, we move on to the hands-on activities. We suggest a few simple and creative activities that can bring lessons to life again in a third and final part.

Brief history of the English language

As researchers of the English language intending to better understand the changes that the plurals of nouns have undergone over the centuries, we think it is appropriate to go back in time and analyse the most important linguistic changes concerning the irregular plurals.

The English language evolved throughout three major periods: Old English (OE), Middle English and Modern English (ME), the last of which is subdivided into early Modern English and late Modern English. During these three periods, the English language went through lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactic shifts.

The time that roughly goes from 450 to 1150 is known as **the period of full inflections** (Baugh and Cable, 2000, p. 50). In this OE period, like any other Germanic language, English was inflected, though today most of these inflections have disappeared. Apart from this, word order was quite varied. For example, adjectives would come before the nouns, as did prepositions and articles, though the verb could either appear before the subject or at the end of the sentence, much like Latin. However, word order would later become relatively fixed (Crystal, 2000, p. 20).

During this period, several peoples invaded Britain and their influence was of the utmost importance in terms of lexical borrowings. The Romans left the island in 410 before the arrival of the Saxons, the Jutes and Angles around the 450s and additional Latin influence was later wielded due to Christian missionaries in their endeavour to Christianise Britain. Latin borrowings from this period were related to everyday life, such as plants, animals, food, drink, household items, clothing, military and legal institutions, commerce and religion, but amount to less than 200 words nowadays. Latin endings also remained in the loan words, e.g. *plante* ‘plant’; *cýse* ‘cheese’; *ceμες* ‘shirt’; *weall* ‘wall’; *ceapian* ‘buy’; *munuc* ‘monk’. The survival of Celtic river names – Thames, Avon, Don, Exe, Usk, Wye – and town names – Dover, Eccles, Bray, London and Kent, is also noteworthy although these are residual (Crystal, 2000, p. 24-25; Hogg and Denison, 2008, p. 8).

OE appeared to be heavily dependent on Latin sounds, much closer to the way words were actually spoken, although there was an absence of universal spelling rules, reflected in a great spelling variation even among scribes. OE was much more phonetic than ME, not facing the problem of silent letters, e.g. OE *writan* did not have a silent *w*; OE ‘it’ was *hit*, which was dropped as it is today, because it is an unstressed pronoun. The language was then highly inflected; the function of a word in a sentence was marked by the kind of ending it had, be it verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives or even the definite article. For that reason, OE nouns, which could be masculine, feminine, or neuter, regardless of the biological sex of the referents, would appear in nominative, accusative, genitive and dative forms (e.g. *se mon = the man*), according to whether they performed the role of subject, direct object, possessive or adverbial (Baugh and Cable, 2000, pp. 55-56).

The Vikings represented the second linguistic invasion bringing about the effect of Old Norse (ON). They introduced personal names of Scandinavian origin and other general words, the *sk-* sounds, the personal pronoun system, part of the present tense of the verb 'to be' (*are* and *-s* 3rd person singular), and the verbal inflection *-s*, to name only a few examples of their influence (Baugh and Cable, 2000, pp. 72-74, 90; Hogg and Denison, 2008, p. 16).

The linguistic result of this invasion was threefold: a large number of place names from Danish settlements, personal names of Scandinavian origin, and many general words, of which 1,500 survived into ME. In some cases, the ON word would live on (e.g. egg, sister or silver); in others, it would be the OE word (e.g. path, sorrow, swell). But there are also cases of many duplicate words, some still used today with close or specialised meanings (e.g. ON dike – OE ditch; hale – whole; raise – rise; scrub – shrub; sick – ill; skill – craft; skin – hide; skirt – shirt), whereas others are still being used in regional dialects (e.g. ON garth – OE yard; kirk – hurch; laup – leap; nay – no; trigg – true). (Crystal, 2000, pp. 25-26)

One of the landmarks of OE was the first vowel shift, which resulted in some phonetic changes. To illustrate this phenomenon, we can mention the Germanic singular **fōt* and plural **fōtiz*, in which the *ō* became *ē* and later came to be pronounced [i:], leading to the dropping of the final *-z*, as in modern *feet*. Through this process, *fēt* emerged then as an irregular in English. Other examples in today's words can also be mentioned: food/feed, strong/strength, long/length (another thorny issue in the teaching of English). This process of sound shift has come to be called *i-mutation* or *i-umlaut* or *vowel harmony*: all back vowels in the context of [i] or [j] were changed into front vowels, as well as the short front vowels and diphthongs, being articulated further forward and higher (Baugh and Cable, 2000, p. 76; Crystal, 2000, p. 19; Lass, 2008, p. 53).

In conclusion, in the OE period, the major influences are those of Latin and Old Norse: up to the 10th century, the surviving Latin words were more practical and everyday words; afterwards, the vocabulary became more scholarly and technical.

The period from 1150 to 1500 is considered to be **the period of levelled inflection**, according to Baugh and Cable's terminology (2000, p. 50), in which the main linguistic changes occurred. The effects of the Norman invasion in 1066 worked their way into the language through Norman French, which became at that time the official language of government, law, administration, literature, and the Church. The early influences of Latin were still evident in science and learning and in the Church as well.

In line with what happened with Old Norse, there are cases in which the French word replaced the OE equivalent, e.g. *leod* → people; *wlitig* → beautiful; *stow* → place, leading to the

disappearance of hundreds of OE words, whilst there are others in which both survived with different senses or connotations, as is shown in table 1.

OE	French
begin	commence
calf	veal
child	infant
deer	venison
freedom	liberty
happiness	felicity
help	aid
hide	conceal
holy	saintly
love	charity
meal	repast
ox	beef
pig	pork
sheep	mutton
wedding	marriage

Table 1 – OE and French word pairs (Crystal 2000, p. 49).

The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) marked the decline of French and the rise of Middle English as the widely spoken language, despite the fact that the people carried on speaking some form of OE even after the Norman invasion. In 1362, Middle English was used for the first time at the opening of Parliament in the Pleading in English Act (or Statute of Pleading) and, by 1425, Middle English was widely used in England, both in writing and in speech (Baugh and Cable, 2000, p. 138; Crystal, 2000, p. 31).

According to a number of scholars, the reason Middle English did not succumb to French was that, by the 11th century, it was too well established to be supplanted, having considerable written literature (e.g. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, the renowned work *Beowulf* or *The Seafarer*, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and King Alfred's many translations) and a strong oral tradition (Crystal, 2000, p. 31). Hogg and Denison (2008, p. 16) also support the prominence of English, stating that, despite the inevitable influences during the Danish and the Norman Conquests, *the language remained fundamentally English*.

As for other features of Middle English, word inflections were gradually replaced by word order (SVO), because hearing and distinguishing inflectional endings became increasingly difficult, especially phonetically similar endings, like *-en*, *-on*, and *-an*. Concurrently, the use of prepositions also became more important, sometimes used together with surviving inflections (e.g. *to the shippes*). The only noun case to survive was the genitive (Crystal, 2000, pp. 30-31).

Simultaneously, according to various authors (Crystal, 2000, pp. 41-42; Lass, 2008, pp. 43-108), a continuous process of sound change began, with the following occurrences:

- some sounds disappeared or took on a different value;
- some consonants, because of French influence, were spelt differently: *sc* became *sh* or *sch* (*scip* → *ship*), *c* turned into *ch* or *ch* (*church*) and *cg* or *gg* into *dg* (*bridge*);
- the progressive monophthongisation of the OE diphthongs spelt *ea* and *eo*;
- long vowels came to be marked with an extra vowel letter and short vowels were identified with consonant doubling (*sitting* instead of *siting*), because it was no longer needed to mark the lengthened vowels;
- the loss of unstressed vowels which had previously been mentioned used to mark inflectional endings: *stane* ‘stone’ or *name* (/a:/) ‘name’, as well as the consonantal use of *u* (‘have’) and affricative use of *g* (*rage* instead of *rag*) (though the final *-e* disappeared, the spelling remained, showing that the preceding vowel was long);
- the appearance of new diphthongs due to French influence /oɪ/ and /ʊɪ/ and of [h] at the beginning of many OE words.

It is also worth mentioning the emergence of new contrastive sounds, such as /v/, which became more important in distinguishing pairs of words: /f/ vs. /v/ in *feel* vs. *veal*; the French influence in the difference between /s/ and /z/ in *zeal* vs. *seal*; the *ng* sound /ŋ/ at the end of a word (e.g. *thing* vs. *thin*). Finally, a letter could have different pronunciations depending on the dialect area in which it appeared; for example, /x/, which is spelt *gh* in the south and *ch* in the north (e.g. *night* vs. *nicht*) (Crystal, 2000, p. 43).

A follow-up of the first vowel shift is the Great Vowel Shift (the “pull-me, push-me” phenomenon), which affected the English language extensively. All long vowels gradually came to be pronounced with a greater elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth. Those that could be raised were raised; those remaining became diphthongs. It represented the development of long and short vowels and thus the creation of new vowels and diphthongs, the addition of an extra vowel in spelling to represent long vowel sounds (*sē* =

see), the doubling of consonants after short vowels and the loss of unstressed vowels that distinguished inflectional endings (Baugh and Cable, 2000, pp. 232-234; Crystal, 2000, p. 55).

Figure 1 represents the various stages of the Great Vowel Shift that continued through approximately 200 years, well into the Modern English period.

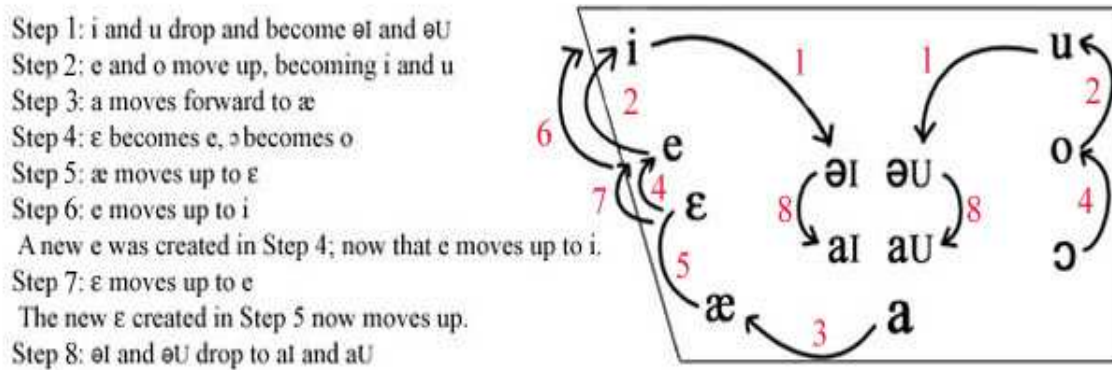


Figure 1: The process of the Great Vowel Shift.¹

From 1500 on, during the period known as **Modern English** (ME), the English language lost its remaining inflections (Baugh and Cable, 2000, p. 50). During this time in which less linguistic changes took place, one of the historical events that enabled linguistic stabilisation was the setting up of the press by William Caxton in Westminster in 1476. The printing press represented a thrust to create a standard language and its study: within 150 years, about 20,000 books appeared (Crystal, 2000, p. 56).

However, the London Chancery Standard should also be taken into account (Crystal, 2000, pp. 40-41), since, in the 1430s, there was a vast output in English from this office created by King Henry V, so that his government officials would use (Middle) English instead of Anglo-Norman or Latin. The scribes working there first travelled with the king to prepare his documents and, later, were based in Westminster, fostering the standardisation of English in handwriting, spelling and grammatical forms, consequently influencing the development of a standard written language. The scribes would impose a great deal of order on the variety of spellings and the choices made were largely those which became standard, carrying enormous prestige, such as the ones following:

- *qu* was replaced by *cw* (e.g. queen for *cwēn*);
- *gh* was used instead of *b* (e.g. night, enough);
- *ch* instead of *c* or *cc* (e.g. church);

¹ Menzer (2000).

- *ou* instead of *u* (e.g. house);
- *c* before *e* instead of *s* (e.g. cercle ‘circle’, sell ‘cell’);

Because *u*, *n*, *m* and *v* were written in a similar way (the minims, typographically speaking) and brought about the so-called minim confusion – some *u* were replaced by *o* (come, love, one, son). Finally, the increased use of *k*, *z*, *j*; and the complementary use of *v*, changing according to the position they were used in, e.g. *vnder*, *haue* (Crystal, 2000, pp. 40-41).

The Renaissance was flooded with new publications in English, prompted by the renewed interest in the classical languages and literatures with various new translations, along with the development of the fields of science, medicine and the arts: the Reformation, the discoveries of Copernicus, the European exploration of Africa and the Americas. There was a major focus on vocabulary through borrowings from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, as well as a number of indigenous languages from North America, Africa and Asia, so as to accurately talk about new concepts, techniques and inventions. This influx of foreign vocabulary is called the *inkhorn* by the purists, who were countered by the movement of *Chaucerisms*, the revival of obsolete English words. Later, Swift, Dryden and Defoe proposed an Academy of English to try and stop the changes they believed were corrupting the language, but it never got widespread support, the only exception being the English Academy of Southern Africa, created in 1961. (Crystal, 2000, pp. 60-61, 73)

Despite various attempts, a lack of uniformity in spelling and punctuation was still experienced in this period. In the 17th century, the English writing system was still ‘in a mess’, marked more by the survival of certain forms and usages that have since disappeared than by any fundamental developments. The only inflections retained in the noun were those marking the plural and the possessive, the former being the focus of our paper. Despite highly regularised, mid-17th century printing conventions established a deeper gap between writing and speaking, and the Modern English filled with irregular spellings had come to stay (Crystal, 2000, pp. 66-67).

The first dictionaries arrived, producing further pressure for the need for standardisation, of which we will mention just a few: Mulcaster’s collection of ‘hard’ words in 1582; Nathaniel Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* in 1721; Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, which offered the first authoritative lexicon treatment; and John Walker’s *Pronouncing Dictionary of English* in 1774. (Crystal, 2000, pp. 79-81)

During the 18th century, English had the spelling, punctuation and grammar of today, with few exceptions: though many words were spelt the same, they had a different meaning, as well as a number of differences in pronunciation and stress.

The 19th century was marked by an awareness of the nature and use of language. With the widespread standardisation resulting from the compilation of dictionaries, grammars, spelling books and pronunciation manuals, came also an increased sensitivity about the ordinary users of language, the range of varieties that existed and the social nuances attached to different usages.

Other historical features: irregular plurals

Bearing in mind all these historical features, teaching irregular plurals to students can be a rather complex task, because they normally do not understand the existence of numerous different irregular plural endings. Therefore, they can come up with questions like these: Why is the plural of *man* *men* instead of **mans*? Who came up with such an odd irregular plural for *woman*? Why did not they give the word *pan* a similar plural, such as *pen*? In order to attempt to explain some of these plurals, teachers must have some degree of knowledge of the evolution of English, as well as information on the OE declensions.

In OE, there were two declensions: the weak or consonant declension and the strong or vowel declension, according to whether the Germanic stem ended in a consonant or in a vowel. The irregular “weak” declension is shown in figure 2 that follows (Hogg, 2000, pp. 124-136).

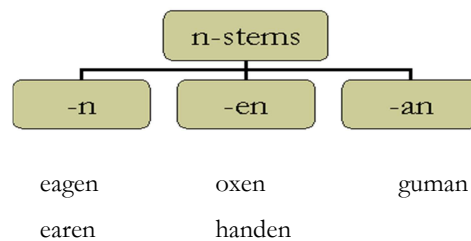


Figure 2 – Examples of the irregular weak declension.

In the 13th century, the *-en* plural was used in England’s Southern Dialects and the *-s* plural was used in the North and in the Midlands. During the 14th century, the *-s* plural came to be considered the regular form, despite the persistence of umlaut plurals (*man/men*, *foot/feet*, *goose/geese*). In the 16th century, there were still certain survivals of the old weak plural in *-n*, e.g. *fon* (foes); *kneen* (knees); *fleen* (fleas); *eyen* (eyes); *shoon* (shoes); *kine* (cows); *bosen* (hoses), most of which ended up disappearing. (Baugh and Cable, 2000, pp. 154-156, 235; Lass, 2008, p. 52)

As far as the *-s* plural is concerned, the regular strong plural inflection in OE comes from the OE possessive singular form and nominative and accusative plural forms. The plural inflexion *-as* is subsequently the antecedent of the modern standard plural marker. It is the

most important declension, containing about one third of the nouns in the language. (Baugh and Cable, 2000, pp. 154-156, 235)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned examples, Latin and Greek endings also managed to survive, perhaps due to later entries in the language, especially during the Renaissance, and can still be found in English, for which the respective declensions must be taken into account.

The English words of Latin origin follow the Latin noun declensions, as follows (Green, 2008, pp. 27-28):

- 1st Latin Declension, in which nouns ending in *-a* bear a plural form in *-ae*
 alumna [foster daughter], alumnae
 ala [wing], alae
- 2nd Latin Declension, in which nouns ending in *-us* have a plural in *-i*
 alumnus [foster son], alumni
 locus [place], loci
 or nouns ending in *-um* which have plural in *-a*
 datum [thing given], data
 medium [middle], media
- 3rd Latin Declension, in which *-es* is added to the masculine and feminine base
 index [pointer], base indic-, indices
 cicatrix ["scar tissue"], base cicatric-, cicatrices
 appendix [an addition], base appendic-, appendices
 or to the base of a neuter noun we add *-a*
 genus [kind, birth], base gener-, genera
 corpus [body], base corpor-, corpora
 onus [burden], base oner-, onera
- 4th Latin Declension, comprising nouns ending in *-us*
 hiatus [gap], hiatuses (or hiatus)
 plexus [network], plexuses (or plexus)
 nexus [bond], nexuses (or nexus)
- 5th Latin Declension, in which nouns in *-es* have the same singular and plural forms
 species [appearance > kind], species
 caries [decay], caries

As far as the Greek words are concerned, they also conform to the Greek noun declensions:

- to Greek words ending in *-as*, we add *-antes*
atlas [status of a hero], atlantes
atlas [map collections], atlases
- to Greek words ending in *-ma*, *-ta* is added
stigma, stigmata
schema, schemata or schemas
dogma, dogmata or dogmas
- to Greek words ending in *-us*, we add *-es*
cactus, cactuses
hippopotamus, hippopotamuses
octopus, octopuses
- to Greek words ending in *-is*, add *-es*
analysis, analyses
basis, bases
crisis, crises
- to Greek words ending in *-on*, *-a* is added
criterion, criteria
phenomenon, phenomena

Apart from being a somewhat distant reality for students, another problem arises with using the Latin and Greek declensions with students; in some cases both Latin and Greek plurals can be used in words ending in *-s* with no logical explanation: cactus, cactuses or cacti; hippopotamus, hippopotamuses or hippopotami; or octopus, octopuses or octopi.

Teachers have to consider a reasonable number of issues for the irregular plural of nouns, an apparently simple grammar item.

Hands-on activities

To conclude our paper, we suggest a set of activities that can be done in class with all levels, as long as the appropriate adjustments are made. The main purpose of presenting these activities is to demonstrate that grammar does not have to be a boring subject and it can, in fact, become appealing to students so that they grasp, apprehend and effectively learn it and, more importantly, use it in real contexts.

If we bear in mind the fact that CLT places a strong emphasis on communication by means of the use of the foreign language, we may come to think that this approach means in fact not teaching grammar. This is one of the four misconceptions presented by Thompson (1996), the others being that CLT means teaching only speaking, it means pair work and thus role play and also expects too much from the teacher. One of the reasons for these misconceptions is that, as Swan (1985a, p. 2) stresses, CLT shares the same vices as any “intellectual revolution”:

it over-generalizes valid but limited insights until they become virtually meaningless; it makes exaggerated claims for the power and novelty of its doctrines; it misrepresents the currents of thought it has replaced; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion; it is choked with jargon (Swan, 1985a, p. 2).

However, our aim is not to discuss the pros and cons of CLT, but simply expose our approach to grammar. Thompson (1996, p. 10) deconstructs the common misconception that CLT means not teaching grammar, explaining that this was a likely *reaction against the heavy emphasis on structure at the expense of natural communication*, carried out by previous teaching approaches and methods. Nonetheless, it came to be accepted that *an appropriate amount of time should be devoted to grammar, [which did not mean] a return to a traditional treatment of grammar rules* (*idem*, p. 11). Teachers thus need to cover grammar items in order to allow students to discover them, and ignore the guilty feeling that usually haunts teachers for not being communicative, for translating or explaining grammar, for behaving like (old-fashioned) teachers (Swan, 1985b, p. 82).

Therefore, in line with CLT assumptions, learners should be exposed to the language in a comprehensible and meaningful context, so as to better understand the function and meaning of the grammar item; then they would turn to the analysis of the grammatical forms and explicitly discuss them, attempting to work out the underlying rules and usage (Swan, 1985a p. 11)

Having said this, a means to encourage communication among students has been the use of games, a way to enhance motivation, problem-solving and critical thinking – games have always been one of the banners of CLT. Games are not only a welcome break from the usual classroom routine, but also encourage interaction and cooperation among students and create a meaningful context for language use (Kim, 1995, p. 35). They could be used as warmers, coolers, practice and consolidation activities or simply for recycling grammar, given the logical sequence devised by teachers.

The seven activities we chose to present are a mixture of original activities, selected activities from specific authors, and adaptations that could be used at any moment of the class to perform the intended function, be it warm-up, cool-down, consolidation or recycling.

Activity 1: Noughts and Crosses (adapted from Rinvoluceri, 1984, pp. 13-14).

Each player chooses a word from the box and has to state its singular or plural form in order to complete either a vertical line or a horizontal one. The one to finish first wins the game.

It can be played with increasingly difficult nouns, mixing regular ones with those originated in Germanic, Latin and Greek. It can even be turned into a more complex activity if, along with the identification of the missing forms, students have to justify their choice by using the historical explanations given by the teacher.

FOOT	DOGMA	HOOF
MAN	MOUSE	GOOSE
CHILD	PHENOMENA	OX

Figure 3 – Noughts and crosses.

Activity 2: Grammar Tennis (Rinvoluceri, 1984, pp. 38-39).

This can be played with two people and is especially good for pair work. A serves B by saying the singular form of an irregular noun, e.g. *woman*. B responds to the service and gives the plural of the noun given by A, e.g. *women*. Then, A has to create a sentence using the irregular plural, e.g. *Women are in charge of the Research Centre*. It is now B's turn to serve. All steps are repeated once again.

Activity 3: Back-Writing (Rinvoluceri, 1984, pp. 121-122).

Have students stand up and take a partner. Tell them to imagine that their partners' back is one of those white boards that someone has written on with an indelible pen. They must try and rub it clean. A rubs B's back. Ask them to change round. B rubs A's back. Ask A to write any irregular plural he/she can remember on B's back. B then writes the singular form on A's back. For instance, A writes 'oxen', B writes 'ox'.

Activity 4: The Odd One Out.

This can be individual work or pair/group work. Students have to read the nouns and identify which does not fit with the rule so as to explain either the singular or the plural forms. Each group of examples can be increased with more difficult nouns and the teacher can also ask students to justify their choices.

Which is the odd one out?

- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| a) book | b) watch | c) coat | d) clock |
| a) mouse | b) man | c) child | d) goose |
| a) wife | b) thief | c) chief | d) wolf |
| a) criterion | b) stigma | c) cactus | d) crisis |
| a) locus | b) datum | c) atlas | d) alumna |

Activity 5: Word search.

Students will have to find singular or plural forms of nouns in the following box, horizontally, vertically, diagonally or upside down, and state the forms that are missing. If it is the singular that they find, they must state the plural and vice versa.

A	S	E	V	I	W	G
F	I	Q	O	T	P	C
D	L	I	H	C	U	J
R	O	P	D	A	T	A
D	E	N	O	C	I	T
G	N	X	Z	Y	K	E
B	E	D	Y	S	J	E
N	M	V	T	O	O	F

Figure 4 – Word search.

Activity 6: Irregular plurals in movement (Rinvoluceri, 2002, p. 40).

The teacher previously chooses a dozen irregular plurals and gets students to push their chairs against the walls to form two parallel lines facing the teacher and equidistant from the side walls of the room. One column will be the 'singular team' and the other will be the 'plural team'. The teacher shouts, for example, 'mouse' and a member of the singular team rushes to the wall, while someone from the other team tries to stop him/her from getting there. If they manage to touch their class mates, then they must join their team. The game continues with more singular or plural forms of irregular nouns and the teacher may linger on the initial sound of the words, in order to build up excitement. The team that gets to the end with more students will win the game.

An interesting experiment would be to shout out nouns such as ‘ship’ or ‘sheep’, and see their reaction. This could function as a start-up activity to approach the nouns with the same form for both singular and plural.

Activity 7: Irregular Battleships (Almarza *et al.*, 2000, p. 3B).

This game requires two players, each with a different worksheet so they can play a battleship-like game. Here are two different examples of the worksheets that can be used.

Worksheet A – key

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	
1	A	T	A	M	G	I	T	S			1
2											2
3	C				W		C		H		3
4	R		H		O		A		S		4
5	I		T		L		C		I		5
6	S		E		V		T		F		6
7	E		E		E		I				7
8	S		T		S						8
9											9
10	A	I	D	E	M		T	E	E	F	10
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	

Figure 5 – Battleship worksheet A (key).

Worksheet A – clean

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	
1											1
2											2
3											3
4											4
5											5
6											6
7											7
8											8
9											9
10											10
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	

Figure 6 – Battleship worksheet A (clean).

Worksheet B – key.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	
1		M			D		N				1
2		I			A		E				2
3		C			T		X				3
4		E			A		O			G	4
5										E	5
6	N	E	M		E	C	I	D		E	6
7										S	7
8	N	E	R	H	T	E	R	B		E	8
9											9
10	P	H	E	N	O	M	E	N	A		10
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	

Figure 7 – Battleship worksheet B (key).

Worksheet B – clean.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	
1											1
2											2
3											3
4											4
5											5
6											6
7											7
8											8
9											9
10											10
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	

Figure 8 – Battleship worksheet B (clean).

Conclusion

A fairly straightforward item of the English grammar, such as the irregular plural, can bring about huge problems among students, especially younger ones that are unable to grasp the explanations for such variation.

Consequently, it was our purpose not only to recycle a bit of the history of the English language, namely Old English, Middle English and Modern English and some of their main features, but also to present suggestions for ways to introduce this issue into classroom

activities following the main guidelines of CLT in the creation of a meaningful context in which students take the opportunity to discuss language, solving problems and critically reaching a conclusion to ultimately communicate. Games present such an opportunity, which we tried to make the most of in order to tackle the grammatical item of irregular plural of nouns. The more creative the activities, the easier it turns out for teachers to better explain the elaborate nature of the irregular plurals of English nouns and for students to grasp it.

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